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ABSTRACT

Choral reading can be used by teachers to enhance children's appreciation for poetry and to develop their personal, social, psychological, cognitive/affective, and language values. It is useful for teachers to begin by creating an awareness in children of the basic elements of choral reading: tempo, rhythm, pitch, stress, and juncture. Then an arrangement of the work to be read must be made: the reading can be in unison, antiphonal, cumulative, or by single voices. In presenting a sequence of choral speaking skills, teachers might begin with repetition of sounds, then go to repeated refrains, simple unison reading, and finally to small group work. The poem must be scored so that groups and individuals will know when to speak, and it should be marked so that all agree on the emphasis. In many poems, it is possible to create a verbal obbligato to provide a background appropriate to the poem. (TJ)

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Choral Reading: Who Has the Time? Why Take Time?

by

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All reading series include suggestions for enrichment activities, and choral reading is often recommended. Yet two factors suggest that probably few children are involved in choral reading on a regular basis. One, few teachers have had specific training in how to lead choral reading. Two, the values of this activity have been described too generally. Especially given the current "back to basics" push - teachers may not be clear about the benefits of choral reading. Because of this, it is important to examine the nature of choral reading and its benefits to children. What is there about this experience which is basic? How can teachers justify including choral reading as part of the curriculum?

All reading series include poetry. One way to enhance children's appreciation of this poetry is to involve them in repeating it aloud with you, after you have introduced the poem. This activity, saying together a piece of verse (or less frequently, prose) is called choral reading. The lines are put on the chalkboard, or overhead projector, and teacher and children read aloud from the text. After students have become familiar with the piece, the process becomes more like reciting, since the poem will be unconsciously learned with the words serving only as "cues."

Why is it important to include this as an integral part of the reading/language arts program? In what ways do such oral activities with poetry

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enhance children's appreciation of the genre and extend their reading skills?

Adding something to an overcrowded reading curriculum necessitates specifying benefits to be gained. There are several kinds of values resulting from choral reading. Personal values accrue as children learn to appreciate literature by participating in it, instead of simply passively listening to the teacher read. Social values include learning to work together to achieve a result. Children contribute their ideas and as the class selects interpretations to retain, and discards others, students learn to cooperate. There are psychological values in satisfying group experiences without self-consciousness as in a formal presentation. The cohesive, unifying effect of participation as a member of a group is important to children. There are also cognitive/affective values. As the class attempts to solve a problem presented by the teacher who asks, "How shall we say this next line together?" children are developing their cognitive skills. Affective values are present as boys and girls experience choral speaking which emphasizes the art, rather than the skill of reading. Finally, there are language values which result, as children learn to use their voices effectively. As the group works with the teacher to explore effective ways to use paralinguistic elements of pitch, stress, and juncture (pause), children become more aware of possibilities and alternatives in these expressive overlays of speech.

Elements of Choral Reading

For a class at any age or grade level, a basic decision will concern how the poem will be said. There are many ways voices can be used to enhance an oral interpretation. At first, and especially with young children, the teacher

makes such decisions - suggesting ways students should speak the poem to make it interesting. Later, and especially with older children, the teacher will seek input from the students.

The class can experiment with:

tempo. Is a line to be said faster or slower so it will be more interesting? Are there lines which need to begin fast and then slow down, or begin slowly and increase in speed?

rhythm. Within the selected tempo of any line/stanza, how do the accents, or heavily stressed words, fall to establish a predictable "beat or movement?"

pitch. Where should our voices be high, and where low? Are there particular words which need to be at a different pitch than others? Or is there a sentence (or line) contour, as the pitch moves up or down?

stress. Which words in a line, or which lines need added emphasis by being said louder? Which words do we want to hit harder to give added importance?

juncture. Where do we stop to clarify meaning at the ends of thoughts? Or perhaps within a thought, to give added emphasis to a line? Is the stop a full one, or only a momentary pause? Often in teaching basic decoding skills we emphasize to children the importance of such meaning enhancers as commas and periods. In interpreting a piece orally, children experience the value of the punctuation in a more immediate way.

How often we encourage children during oral reading sessions, to read more "expressively." And how often does that exhortation result in simply more of the typical, dull and plodding reading. Perhaps that is because children don't understand what they are being asked to do. In choral reading, the way to read expressively is made abundantly clear.

Arrangement

Before beginning the poem, the teacher will decide who is to say what, studying the poem to determine the best division for a particular verse.

Several alternatives are possible, including:

unison. This is the most difficult to do effectively. Unfortunately, it seems deceptively simple and many teachers are misled into trying to perfect this arrangement first. It is almost impossible to avoid a sing-song monotony which usually results when many inexperienced speakers read together.

antiphonal. In this arrangement, different small groups are responsible for different parts of the poem. Usually one begins by dividing students into two groups, though children quickly become able to work in more groups than that. In antiphonal poems, the groups alternate lines. "Snail" by Maxine Kumin can easily be done by two groups alternating the lines. [1]

cumulative. This is adding more voices as the poem gathers momentum, in one which builds toward the end. An example is "Trains" by James Tippet.[2]

single voices. This arrangement is best saved until children have gained enough confidence in their ability to speak a line so they won't mind saying one alone. A poem which can be done effectively in this way is "Mice " by Rose Fyleman.[3] Have all children say the first and last two lines together. Assign the remaining twelve lines to eight individual speakers (the last three having two lines each to say). After you have done the poem through once, be sure to reassign the middle lines to other speakers, to notice the different interpretations possible.

Sequence

As in most things, there is an order to choral speaking. It is not as clearly defined as the sequence in phonics skills, for instance, but it exists nonetheless. In working with children it is crucial to move from simple to complex: from short to long poems, from regular rhyme and rhythm schemes to less regular ones. It is difficult to prescribe a progression without knowing a specific group of children, because students' interests also affect sequence, but let me suggest one sequence as a possibility.

Begin with poetry including much repetition of sounds, to involve children in "saying along" as you read. This emphasizes attentive listening

an important component of reading ability. Watch for children who are saying the words as you read. Establish eye contact with the child, and by a nod of your head or an encouraging look, let them know such participation is valued. Such poems as Marie Hall Ets' Jay Bird[4] provide repetition:

a hoptoad croaking
in the swamp
croaking, croaking, croaking.

On the last line encourage children to repeat the words with you. Brilliant blue watercolors in the author's easily recognizable style face the page on which is arranged a simple verse.

Repetition in "Five Little Pussy Cats," can also be used to invite informal saying of words with the teacher. This is from a collection entitled Mittens for Kittens[5] which features other amusing uses of language, and is a good beginning book.

Next move to literature with repeated refrains. Wanda Gag's Millions of Cats[6], though not poetry, helps lay needed participation groundwork. Many such poems as "To Market, to Market," from Mother Goose are read to children who are pleased to say the refrains with you. At this stage no formal rehearsal is necessary. For older children, the complex five line refrain of "Here We Come A-Caroling"[7] is appropriate. Since so few children have this experience now, it would be pleasant to take your group caroling. A trip to a retirement home, for example, to sing and then recite this poem, would be rewarding for listeners and for the children.

Following repeated refrains, children can work with cumulative refrains, more difficult because they grow longer. Start with The House That Jack Built[8], or perhaps Ghost in a Four Room Apartment.[9] The cumulative refrain intrigues children with:

Here is Horace, good and bad,
Who lives in a four-room apartment

Here is Doris, dressed in plaid,
Sister of Horace, good and bad
Who lives in a four-room apartment.

Poems at this stage might include The Thirteen Days of Yule,[10] for older children.

Simple unison reading, without extended rehearsal, comes next. Don't attempt to perfect the reading at this stage, but simply emphasize the pleasure which comes from participation. "The Little Turtle"[11] by Vachel Lindsay is appropriate done this way. The rhythm and repetition of words in a story in which each verse interlocks with the next is good for simple group reading. A Ghost Story[12] appeals because it is a familiar cultural experience - all children have been frightened of something unknown in a dark place. Students will ask to have it read over and over again, and will delight in saying it with the teacher. The darkly brilliant cut-paper and paint illustrations by Eric Carle enhance the story.

Small group work can follow, as children say such poems as "The Sea Gull"[13] by Elizabeth Coatsworth. Divide your class into two groups, and alternate lines in "A Farmer Went Trotting."[14] "Wind Weather," by Virginia Brasier[15] has three stanzas, each of which divides logically into two parts. "The Baby Goes to Boston" by Laura Z. Richards alternates lines.[16] Children today may not have ridden on trains, but the repetition of the nonsense words is pleasant anyway.

At the beginning of a sequence of experiences, it is possible for the teacher to simply put the poem where children can see it, and teach an interpretation by rote. Put the words on the board, even if children cannot as yet decode them. This helps beginning readers pick out one or two familiar

words. As you follow along the line with your hand under each word, students' sense of left to right progression will be strengthened. Suggest to students an effective way to say the poem, and all can enjoy the activity. Later, you will want to involve girls and boys in thinking about and making suggestions for ways the reading can be varied. At some stage the interpretation will necessitate a way to write down what the children are to to with their voices.

Scoring the Poem

A composer decides which instrument will play a specific part in a musical score, and how it will be played. So too the teacher will decide - at least at the beginning - which voices will say what lines, and how they will be said.

It is important to specify that the teacher does this when children begin, for students will have ideas about how the poem should be divided and said, which should be used as soon as possible. The teacher encourages these ideas and takes time to try out the variety of ways children suggest. As the ideas for interpretation become more complex, having a way to record them is helpful.

A fourth-grade class recently evolved the following method of dividing this poem as the way they liked best after experimenting with several variations.

The Goblin

by Rose Fyleman

Group 1 Groups 1&2 Groups 1,2, &3
A goblin lives in our house, in our house, in our house,
A goblin lives in our house all year around. (All children)
Bob He bumps
Jane And he jumps
Ted And he thumps
Mary And he stumps
Tim He knocks
Al And he rocks
Liz And he rattles at the locks

Group 1 Groups 1&2 Groups 1,2, &3
A goblin lives in our house, in our house, in our house,
A goblin lives in our house all the year around (All children)

Marking the Poem

Teacher and children alike may find it helpful to go through the poem and mark it, so they will remember how they want to read it, once a favorite way is agreed upon.

A group of fifth graders enjoyed the following poem,so we marked it in order to remember how we wanted to say the poem. We worked out the following very rudimentary system of marking:

/ = a slight pause

// = a complete stop

‿ = a continuation of the voice so that the thought is continued to the next line

Λ = a heavy stress on the word

V = a lighter stress on the word

A goblin lives in our house, /in our house,/ in our house,/
A goblin lives in our house all the year round.//

He bumps ⌣

And he jumps ⌣

And he thumps ⌣

And he stumps.//

And he knocks ⌣

And he rocks ⌣

And he rattles at the locks.//

A goblin lives in our house,// in our house,/ in our house,/
A goblin lives in our house all the year around.//

To begin, the class will stick closely to the poem to gain expressive ability in this art. As the teacher senses children are developing the skill to read chorally, (s)he may encourage them to add sounds to enrich the poem.

Creating Verbal Obbligatos

Many poems lend themselves to the creation of verbal obbligatos. The term obbligato, borrowed from music, means a persistent background motif. Usually this refers to a repeated theme played by an instrument against the major melody in a piece of music. In choral reading, it means having some children repeat at patterned intevals words or sound appropriate to heighten the mood of the poem or evoke the image more clearly.

For example, in "Trains" some children may repeat the words clickety-clak in a rhythm they have created as the rest of the students say the poem. The

teacher may want to have a group of children with high voices repeat the clackety-clack in one rhythm while another group with lower-pitched voices repeats the same words in a different rhythm. This provides a background while a third groups says the poem.

Another poem which lends itself readily to the enhancement of an obbligato is "The Cat's Tea Party."[18] Experimenting with mew, meow, and other cat sounds done in different pitches and different rhythms can result in a very rich obbligato background for the poem.

A more involved background is necessary for "Three Little Puffins,"[19] which mentions panting, puffing, chewing, and chuffing - all in one poem! Children enter with enthusiasm into the planning of this intriguing collection of sounds as they vary rhythm and pitch to create an obbligato which may surpass the poem in interest.

Finally, no group of older students should miss the delightful challenge in "Jabberwocky."[20] There are all manner of beasts: toves, mome raths, borogroves, jubjub birds, in addition to the fearsome Jabberwocky. Classes have made up fantastic obbligatos of much complexity as they imagine sounds in rhythm for each of the animals included.

What children are creating in this activity is a sound experience in which the emphasis is on using a piece of poetry as a departure point for a complete imaginative expression. Certainly the same careful attention must be given to the basic reading of the poem as in simple choral reading, but beyond that, the readers are free to evolve as imaginative a group of sounds as they can.

A tape recorder can serve a valuable purpose in this process. As children create their obbligatos, they get involved in the excitement of innovation

and performance, so a recorder is necessary. The teacher captures the sounds on tape so, after the students have done the poem in one way, they may listen to it, reflect upon it, and discuss it. As they do this, new ideas for different ways to do the piece will occur to them. Perhaps someone will suggest adding something, another student will suggest deleting something; yet another may feel altering some part of the total poetry experience would help. As the children reshape, rework, listen and reshape again, the piece moves from its first tentative beginnings to a finished choral sound experience, alive as only young people's imagination can bring something to life.

Summary

Basic decoding skills, backbone of reading programs, are not - of themselves - enough. Onto this skill skeleton we must graft the flesh of children's own creative interpretation of their reading. An effective way to do this is to make choral reading a significant, recurring part of your total reading program.

FOOTNOTES

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